

Unit One: The Indian Religious Background and the Emergence of Buddhism

Buddhism came into existence in the 6th century B.C. in north India with the enlightenment of Siddhārtha Gautama, who is believed to be the Buddha. The enlightenment, or the realization of Gautama through which he was entitled to be known as the Buddha, consisted of the realization of the reality of the world and the final liberation of beings. The reality of the world, which he has realized, is known as the theory of dependent origination (*Paticca-samuppāda*) and the final liberation of the being, which he has experienced, came to be known as the extinction of cankers (*Nibbāna* or *nirodha*), are the two main doctrines of Buddhism.¹ All the other teachings of the Buddha seem to be centered on these two main doctrines.

The nature of the reality and the way how it comes into being are explained under the doctrine of *Paticca-samuppāda*. These two aspects of the reality are known as *dukkha* (suffering) and *dukkha samudaya* (emergence of suffering). The cessation of suffering (*dukkha-nirodha*) and the way of cessation of suffering (*dukkha-nirodha-gāminī-patipada*) are explained under the doctrine of *Nibbāna*. Apart from these doctrinal aspects, Buddhism includes its own ethical, social, political and economic teachings presented by the Buddha, in order to bring the followers on to the path leading to the cessation of suffering. The distinctive characteristic of all these Buddhist teachings is that they were presented by the Buddha quite contrary to the teachings prevailing in the religious, social and philosophical background that existed in India at that time.

When Buddhism arose in India, there were plenty of religious and philosophical view points belonging to two main religious movements, which were known as Brahmanical (also Brahamanical, Bramanical) movement and Śramanic movement. Both these religious movements, which came through a long history, were equally popular among the people in India during the 6th century B.C., when Buddhism came into existence. Therefore, these two religious traditions provide the religious background from which Buddhism emerged.

§ .1 Brahmanical Movement

Brahmanical religious movement is mainly based on the Vedic religion, which was introduced to India by the Indo-Āryan people, who originally belonged to the Indo-European race. They were the people who invaded India during the Vedic period, which is generally believed to fall between 15th to 20th centuries B.C. It is believed that they have inherited a religious cult from their ancestors and they further developed it into an organized system of religion through the passage of time. The religion of Indo-Āryan people has been recorded in the literature known as *Vedās*. Therefore, that religion came to be known as Vedic religion. The stages of the development of that religion can be seen respectively in the literature known as Āranyaka and Brāhmaṇa. From the time of the *Vedās*, the people of the Brāhmaṇa caste of the Indo-Āryan society were considered as the custodians of the religion. Religious practices of the common people had to be performed with the participation of Brāhmaṇa priests under the rules and regulations of their own.

¹ Majjhima Nikāya, Ariyapariyesan Sutta

The religion, which was governed by the Brahmin priests, originally consisted of the worship of gods by praising them with the hymns recorded in the Vedas, and also performing very simple offerings to the gods in order to invoke the blessing of the gods. The aim of religious practice was to obtain worldly gains such as health, wealth, power, long life and so on from the mercy of the gods. But later, when the religion became the profession of the Brāhmaṇa priests, they have introduced a system of sacrifice to the people as the most powerful religious activity, which was thought to be brought forth what they expect from the religion. Ultimately, the ritualistic aspect became more powerful than even the gods in the Vedic or Brahmana religion.

Under this new development in the religion, the system of sacrifice gradually became a more and more complicated and elaborated religious activity, which should be performed with the collaboration of different kinds of Brāhmaṇa priests, who were well versed with sacrificial activities. The sacrifice was considered as something which had mysterious miracle power and which gave the expected result when it was done accurately. The efficacy of the sacrifice purely depended on the hand of the Brāhmaṇa priests as they were the people who knew the methods how to perform it to give the good results. In this way, Brāhmaṇa religion had been developed purely to ritualism at the time of the Buddha.

Almost all the important occasions of life, such as the conception of a baby, birth, giving name, first hair cutting, taking into the religion, starting point of education, marriage, and death etc., were considered as the events on which religious activity, consisting of a sacrifice, should necessarily be performed by the people with the participation of Brahmins. The sacrifices, which were done on these occasions, were named as *Grhya Yāga*, as they had to be performed at the homes of the people concerned. In addition to that, there was another type of sacrifice by the name of *Srauta Yāga*, which was aimed at achieving more power, vigor, fame, and the extension of territory and the like. This type of sacrifice was specially designed only for the powerful and rich people like kings, ministers and millionaires. Sometimes, these sacrifices were conducted for many months in the presence of the public and expending a lot of money.

Brāhmaṇa religion had influenced not only on the religious life of the people but also on the social life as well in many ways. Both religion and education were in the hands of Brahmins. They introduced different kinds of social customs to the society in the name of the religion. The religion was considered to be a responsible institution for the introduction and the recognition of social ethics of Indo-Āryan society. All the religious and social customs which they introduced to the society were accepted as what the God had revealed to their ancestors. So, their religious scriptures were known as *Sṛti* (what is heard). Violation of religious and social norms taught by the Brahmins was considered as sin.

§ .2 Caste system (Varna Dharma)

One of the social customs of Āryan society introduced by the Brāhmaṇas is the caste system. The whole society was categorized into four divisions or classes namely:

- Brahmins (the custodians of religion and education);
- Kshatriyās (warriors, rulers of the country, and their dependents);
- Vaisyās (common people or civilians);
- Sudrās (laborers).

When the Āryan people invaded India, they had to fight with the indigenous people of the country. Because of the war going against the indigenous people, Āryans required three classes of their society namely, a class of people who engaged in religious activities, known as Brāhmaṇas, another class of people who actively engaged in war activities, known as Kshatriyās, and the civilian people who engaged in day to day activities, known as Vaiśyās. Therefore, at the beginning of the Vedic period, there were only three classes in the Āryan society. As these three classes of people came into existence because of the requirement of the society, there was no discrimination among the classes. After the indigenous people were defeated by the Āryans, they too became a part of the Āryan society.

With the inclusion of the indigenous people into the society, there had been discrimination between the Āryans, who were comprised of the three classes, and the indigenous people, on the basis of their colour. The Āryans were fair or white in complexion, while the indigenous people were black or dark. This difference in complexion of the two groups of people led to emergence of colour-division, known as Varṇa-bheda. Under this division, Āryans were considered as higher, while other class as lower. Later on, with the teachings of the Brahmins, colour division (Varṇa-bheda) became the colour-duty (Varṇa-Dharma), which introduced duties of each class emphasizing on their status of superiority and inferiority.

Brahmins had ascribed a religious importance to this duty system to establish it in the society. So, they taught that the Brāhmaṇas were born from the mouth of the god, Kshatriyās from the shoulders, Vaiśyās from the thigh and the Śūdrās from the feet of the god.² Further, they insisted that people from each class inherit their duties from birth as the four classes were created by the god.³ According to the teaching of the caste system, a profession of a person is predetermined by the god. The worse aspect of this class system was to consider the Śūdra class as inferior to the other three classes and to keep them apart from social and religious rights and privileges. Brahmanic teachings on the caste system try to bring out the supremacy of the Brahmins and the inferiority of the Śūdrās.

§ .3 Women's position

Under the Brāhmaṇa religion, the position of women kind also was not so far behind that of the Śūdrās. Women were treated as lower than men. They were confined only to household activities. There was no religious activity of any kind prescribed by the religion for the women.⁴ So they were deprived of religious rights. It was the belief of the Brahmins that it was impossible for women to acquire higher religious achievements due to the fact that they were unintelligent. Socially also they were ill-treated without giving them freedom in the society, and there was an emphasis that the women should live under the protection of some one during their entire life period. So, a woman would have to live in her childhood under the protection of the parents, in her youth under the protection of the husband and in her old age under the protection of the children.⁵

² Brāhnanosya mukhamāśit – Bāhū rājanyah krtah
Ūrū tadasya yat vaiśyam – Padbhyaṁ śūdro ajāyata – Purusha sūkta, X. Rgveda.

³ Cātur varṇyam mayā sṛṣṭam - Guṇakarma vibhāgasah – Bhagavat Gītā

⁴ Nāsti sthrīnām pṛtah yagyo-na vṛttam nāpyuposhata
Patim śuśrūyate yena-tena swargamahīyate - Manusmṛti

⁵ Pitā rakshati kaumāre – Bhātā rakshati yauvane

§ .4 Upanishadic philosophy

Religious ideas of the Brāhmaṇa tradition mentioned above have been recorded in a part of the Vedic literature. Up to the time of the Buddha, the Vedic literature was developed through four stages namely, Veda, Brāhmaṇa, Āranyaka and Upanishads. The whole field of literature covered by the Veda, Brāhmaṇa and Āranyaka is mainly governed by the religious thinking of the Brāhmins. The Upanishadic literature, which contains the philosophical thinking of the Āryans, seems to be quite contrary to the earlier stages of the Vedic literature. Though the Brahmins incorporated Upanishadic literature into their Vedic literature, it is supposed that the philosophical teachings of the Upanishads were born in the minds of the thinkers belonging to both classes of Brāhmaṇa and Kshatriya, who were disgusted with the ritualism of the Brāhmaṇa religious movement.

It is believed that the philosophical teachings contained in the earlier stage of the Upanishads, which covers the literature belonging to the books known as Chāndogya, Brhadāraṇyaka, Aitareya, Kaushītaki, and Taittiriya, are supposed to be contemporaries of the Buddha. At the time of the Buddha, the philosophical thinking presented by Upanishads was gaining popularity, specially among the intellectual class of the society.

The main subjects of the Upanishadic philosophical thinking were the reality of the world and the final liberation of the Samsāric life. The seers of the upanishads claim that they discovered what they taught, by the insight knowledge gained through spiritual development. They did not expect worldly happiness, which was the aim of Brāhmaṇa religious movement. They were interested in spiritual perfection through which, as they believed, the ultimate happiness can be achieved. Their aspiration was illustrated in the following way:

*Asato mā sad gamaya: Lead me from the unreal to the real;
 Tamaso mā jyotir gamaya: Lead me from darkness to light;
 Mr̥tyor mām amṛtam gamaya: Lead me from the mortality of death to immortality.⁶*

Upanishadic sages claimed that they have realized the reality of the world. According to them, the reality is a permanent entity, which is variously known as Sat, Tat, Bhahman and Ātman. This reality, which cannot be described as it is the ultimate or transcendental reality, should be realized through meditation.⁷ Reality pervades everywhere in the world.⁸ It is the truth of the world. Chāndogya Upanishad maintains that the whole world evolved out of Sat, which is known as the universal truth.⁹ In that Upanishad, Uddālaka, a famous Upanishadic sage, explained to his son Svetaketu, how the universe evolved out of the universal reality in the following way: "In the beginning Sat was alone, without a second. It thought 'may I be many'". This explanation reminds us that each and every individual is a manifestation of the reality and therefore, each has a part of universal reality. The universal truth is known as *Jagadātman* (cosmic or universal soul) and the truth inherited by the individual is known as *Pratyagātman* (individual soul). Describing the nature of Brahman, the sole reality of the universe which gave

⁶ Brhadāraṇyaka Upanishad, 1.3. 27

⁷ Ātmā vā are nididhyāśitavyam

⁸ Sarvam khalu idam Brahma

⁹ Sadeva saumyedamagramasīt ekamevādvitīyam. Sa akāmayata prajāyeyatām – Ch 4. Chāndogya Upanishad

birth to individual reality, *Taittiriya Upanishad* says: "That from which these beings are born, that in which when born they live, and that into which they enter at their death, that is Brahman".¹⁰

Beings are unable to understand that the individual reality is nothing but the universal reality due to their ignorance. As long as beings are unaware of the sameness of individual soul and cosmic soul, they are in Samsāra or bondage. Whenever they realize that both are the same, their soul gets united with the universal soul. The realization of truth is itself the *Moksha* or liberation. It is the ultimate happiness, where the individual soul remains forever being united with the universal reality. Union between individual soul and the cosmic soul is considered as the everlasting happiness or the immortality. Therefore, it is the advice of the Upanishads that one must see oneself with identification of the Brahman.¹¹

Individual soul in the Samsāric life has no permanent happiness as it is in bondage. It has to suffer with birth, decay and death. There is no end of suffering as it has to transmigrate from one life to another leaving out the old body and receiving the new body. Therefore, the Upanishads prescribe a way how to realize the reality and to become liberated from the Samsāric existence.

§ .5 Sramanic religious movement

There are different opinions regarding the origin of the Šramana movement. Some scholars try to trace it back to the Indus valley civilization while some others point to an Aryan origin. But, it should be mentioned that we do not have concrete evidence to point out the continual relation between the Šramana movement at the time of the Buddha and its presumed origin by the scholars.

The people who have given up their household life for a religious life are said to be Šramanās. In that sense, even the Buddha and his monastic followers came to be known as Šramanās. The Buddha was known to the people as *Gotama*, the Šamana (*Samano bho gotamo*). When we talk about the Indian religious background on which Buddhism came into existence, we have to discuss about the Šramana movement excluding the Buddhist. During the time of the Buddha, other than the Buddhist Šramanās, there were different groups of Šramanās representing their own systems of religious or philosophical thinking. Therefore, unlike the Brāhmaṇa movement, Šramana movement does not necessarily refer to one and the same religious practice. In comparison to Brāhmaṇa movement, the special characteristic of Šramana movement was that it consisted of different types of wandering ascetics, who did not have permanent residence and they did not appear for religious activities of others, rather than their own. They were differently known as *Paribbajaka*, *Acelaka*, *Jatila*, *Muni*, *Ājivaka*, *Niganṭha*, and so on.

According to the available evidences in the Buddhist scriptures, there appeared mainly six groups of Šramanās, out of which each had the leadership of a teacher or a master at the time of the Buddha. *Sāmaññaphala-sutta* of *Dīghanikāya* mentions their teachings in brief while it gives their names as follows:

1. Pūraṇa Kassapa;
2. Makkhali Gosāla;

¹⁰ *Taittiriya Upanishad*, iii, 1.

¹¹ “*Tat tvamasi aham Brahmā asmi*”

3. Pakudha Kaccāyana;
4. Ajita Kesakambali;
5. Nigantha Nāṭhaputta;
6. Sanjaya Belatthaputta.

The Teaching of Purana Kassapa

Pūrana Kassapa was a non-actionist (*Akiriyyavādi*), who rejected the consequences of good or bad action. He did not accept the ethical value of any action done by a man. For him there was no good or bad or wholesome or unwholesome actions, as both activities do not give rise to any result. He is reported to have said that if one were to go along the south bank of the Ganges killing, slaying, cutting or causing to be cut, burning or causing to be burnt, there would be no evil and as a result of that, no evil would accrue. Or if one were to go along the north bank of the Ganges giving and causing to be given, sacrificing and causing to be sacrificed, there would be no merit and as a result of that, no merit would accrue.¹² As Pūrana Kassapa rejected the results of good or bad Kammās, he was against the moral causation.

The Teaching of Makkhali Gosāla

Makkhali Gosāla is considered to be the leader of Ājivaka School, which maintained the strict determinism or fatalism. According to him, man has no free will and effort of his own. Every thing happens in accordance with fate (Niyati). Like Pūrana Kassapa, Makkhali Gosāla also rejected moral causation. For both, there is no discrimination between good and bad. In addition to this, Makkhali Gosaāla was of the opinion that the individual soul of the being has to be transmigrated for a certain period of time until it gets the freedom from suffering. There is no way, other than living in Samsara, to get the purification. Therefore, "just as a ball of string when thrown runs till it is all unraveled, so fools and wise run on and circle round till they make an end of suffering".¹³

The Teaching of Pakudha Kaccāyana

Pakudha Kaccayana presented a doctrine of substances which are considered as the ultimate constituents of the universe. According to him, the universe is made up of seven elements known as earth, water, fire, air, pleasure and pain and the life principle. These seven elements are substances which are not made, not created, immovable and self existent. Pakudha Kaccāyana also did not accept the efficacy of moral causation. He is reported to have said that whoever cuts off a man's head with a sharp sword does not deprive anyone of life; he just inserts the blade in the intervening space between these seven elements (Kaya).¹⁴

According to some scholars of the history of Indian Buddhism, aforesaid teachings of the three Sramanic masters together constitute the Ājivaka School of Sramanās.¹⁵

¹² The Long Discourses of the Buddha, A translation of Digha Nikaya by Maurice Walshe, Wisdom Publication, Boston, 1995. P. 94

¹³ Ibid, P. 95

¹⁴ Ibid, P. 96

¹⁵ A.K Warder, Indian Buddhism, Motilal Banarsidas Publishers, Delhi, Reprint 1997, p. 40

The Teaching of Ajita Kesakambali

Ajita Kesakambali represented materialistic school of Śrāmanās. According to him, the universe is composed of the four great elements namely, earth, water, fire and air. Human being is nothing more than a specific combination of those elements. There is no existence of being after his death. Ajita Kesakambali proclaimed the complete eradication of the being, which occurs with the death of the being. Just like Ājivakās, Ajita Kesakambali did not accept the moral causation. He completely rejected not only the efficacy of the action either good or bad but also the spiritual perfection claimed by the religions.¹⁶

The Teaching of Niganttha Nāthaputta

Niganttha Nāthaputta or *Wardhamāna Mahāvira* was the leader of Jaina school of Śrāmanās, which was more popular than the other groups of Śrāmanās, when Buddhism arose in India. Jaina school presented both theoretical aspect and practical aspect as its religion. In its theoretical aspect, it asserted a doctrine of transmigrating eternal soul, which is known as *Jīva*. Every being acquires a *jīva* or soul which is covered by the Karmic particles. So long as soul is in bondage of *Karmās*, there is no complete freedom for the being. The freedom of the soul can be achieved through the eradication of *Karmas*. Therefore, the practical aspect of Jainas consisted of a threefold discipline recommended for the eradication *Karmās*, namely (1) destruction of past *Kammās* through the ascetic practices (*purānānam kammānam tapasā vyantibhāvā*, (2) stoppage of present *Karmās* (*navānam kammānam akaranā*), and (3) avoidance of future *Kammās* (*āyatim anavassavo*).¹⁷ According to Niganttha Nāthaputta, all the experiences of the man, whether they are pleasant, unpleasant or indifferent, are due to the results of the past *Kammās*.¹⁸ Therefore, the Kamma theory presented by him can be considered as Karmic determinism. He recommended extremely rigorous ascetic practices for the annihilation of past kammas to which, Buddhism opposed as saying self mortification (*Attakilamathānuyoga*), which should be avoided by the people who had gone forth.

The doctrine of nonviolence was highly recommended in the discipline of Jainās.

The Teaching of Sanjaya Belatthaputta

Sanjaya is believed to have represented the Agnostic or the Skeptic school of Śrāmanās during the time of the Buddha. Sanjaya did not present any conclusive or decisive answer to any of the speculative doctrines, which came under the debate of the day. The concepts like soul, next world, Kamma, and the results of the Kamma and position of the perfected man after his death, were more popular in the philosophical debates during that time. When Sanjaya was asked a question about a doctrinal concept mentioned above, he did not have his own conclusive answer. Instead, he used to answer in order to please the questioner. According to the circumstances, he answered the questions affirmatively or negatively or both or neither. It seems that agnostic thinkers thought that no conclusive answer to any speculative or metaphysical doctrine is possible.

¹⁶ Sāmaññaphala-sutta of Dīgha Nikāya

¹⁷ Devadaha-sutta of Majjhima Nikāya

¹⁸ Ibid

Some scholars of Indian philosophy prefer to describe the method used by Sanjaya as the method of evasion. According to them, agonistic thinkers developed this method for the purpose of debate but, in the real sense, they appeared to have deprecated arguments, as leading to bad tempers and loss of peace in the mind.¹⁹

We have so far discussed specially, the religious background constituted by the two main religious movements that existed in India when Buddhism came into existence. It is the opinion of many of the modern Buddhist scholars that the Buddha presented his teachings as a direct response to the existing religious and philosophical teachings of the day. It is quite evident that the main doctrine of Buddhism, the theory of Dependent Origination, clearly rejects the eternalism of Brāhmaṇas as well as the nihilism of Śramanās.²⁰ The religious practice, the Middle path formulated by the Buddha, also goes against the practice of self indulgence (Kāmaskhallikānuyoga) of the materialistic school and the practice of self mortification (Attakilamathānuyoga) of the Jaina school.²¹

§ .6 Recommended Reference

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¹⁹ A.K Warder, Indian Buddhism, Motilal Banarsidas Publishers, Delhi, Reprint 1997, p. 42

²⁰ Kaccāna-vacchagotta-sutta of Nidāna vaggā in Samyutta Nikāya

²¹ Dhammacakkappavattana-sutta of Samyutta Nikāya